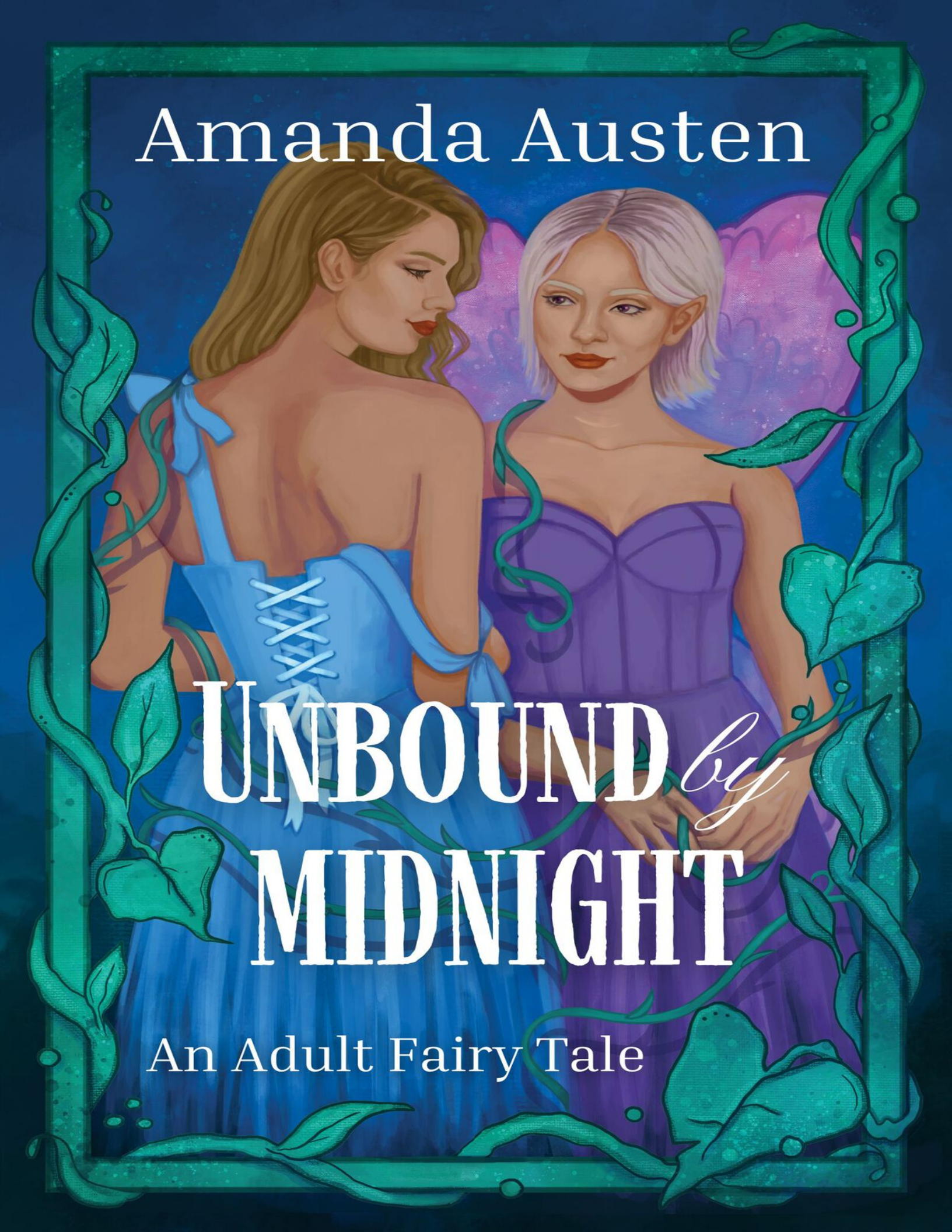




Amanda Austen

UNBOUND *by*
MIDNIGHT

An Adult Fairy Tale

Unbound by Midnight

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by Amanda Austen

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*To those who want an escape from the storybook mold.
This is for you.*

Content Warnings

Unbound by Midnight is an adult fairy tale with mature content and scenes that some may find disturbing. This story contains mentions of deceased parents, violence, bullying, book burning, light bondage and rope (vine) play, masturbation and oral sex.

One

I awoke to the far-off sound of a bell tinkling. Squinting against the bright morning light, I immediately pulled the blankets back over my head. I rolled over, willing myself to go back to sleep. Anything to block out my current reality.

I had been dreaming. Dreaming of distant lands and quiet meadows. Dreaming that I was free, that I had not a care in the world or a place to be. In my dreams, at least, I was unbound.

“Ella!” A voice called out to me, followed by the high-pitched trill of the servant's bell.

I ignored the clamor of voices rising through the floorboards and closed my eyes, trying for a moment to imagine myself anywhere else. Anywhere but here.

My mind took me back to the field of flowers, warm and peaceful and quiet. I conjured rustling grass and a summer breeze, the warmth of the sun on my face, the twitter of birdsong.

The solitude was seductive, and I had almost fallen back asleep when another “El-la!” ripped me from slumber. The delicate tinkle of the bell was at odds with the harsh shrieking of my stepmother, and combined, they were provoking enough to wake me fully. I huffed, rousing, but I refused to rise. *Just another minute*, I told myself, transporting myself back to the sunny meadow.

I was acutely aware of the tension in my muscles, my back and shoulders aching from spending the entirety of yesterday bent over muddy floors. I worked myself weary scrubbing at my stepmother's behest, and despite having left the manor sparkling last night, a gnawing suspicion in my gut told me that there would be more to be done today. I didn't yet have the strength to return to it, though. I just needed a moment for myself.

My fingers began to trace lines down my body, lingering on the plumpness of my own curves. My nipples hardened beneath my chemise, and I rolled one between my thumb and forefinger. A gasp escaped my lips as the world around me faded away.

I skimmed my other hand down my body, tugging up the hem of my chemise. My fingers found their way to the curls between my legs. I began to rub myself beneath the rough blanket, swirling my fingers around my cunt. I dipped my fingers inside of myself, rubbing the slickness between my lips as I pictured myself surrounded by wildflowers.

I could feel myself tensing like a coil. It built up slowly at first, a warmth that twisted through my center, winding me up like a clock. My fingers began to move faster and faster until they were working furiously, until my legs were stretched and my toes flexed.

My body stiffened and then released as a surge of pleasure cascaded down me. The tautness in my core released like a current, as if a dam was breaking and, all of a sudden, the river was flowing.

The world around me blurred, and for a fleeting moment, all that mattered was this blissful escape. I felt airy, as if I were soaring above my body, my thoughts drifting like leaves drifting down a bubbling brook.

I lay spent, allowing myself another minute to catch my breath. Dust particles floated in the air, catching on beams of sunlight that spilled through the open window above me. It had a certain beauty to it.

Glancing around at the dusty loft that served as my bedroom, I took in the scant belongings I could consider *mine*. A humble bed of coarse woolen blankets and bundled straw. A few worn skirts clinging to the walls on rusty nails. A small stack of crumbling books, their pages worn and bindings frayed. A chipped basin set atop a three-legged stool served as a washstand, and upon it balanced an old brush with half of the bristles missing, and a cracked hand mirror that had once belonged to my mother. Cobwebs clustered high in the corners of the vaulted tower, reminding me that no matter how hard I worked at keeping this place clean, there would always be more to do.

It was hard to put into words, but I felt duty bound to this house. This was my parents' home and haven, their pride and my inheritance. My stepmother may have possession of the deed, but it was my story that was beholden to these halls. I had so many wonderful memories here of better times. If I abandoned the house, it was like I was abandoning *them*. I felt a duty to keep it up—despite her attempts to run it into the ground.

My stepmother was either careless or was determined to ruin the place to spite my parents' memory. Perhaps it was a bit of both.

I tried my best to keep it presentable. But no matter how much dust I swept away or how many cobwebs I cleared, they always returned. A lifetime of cleaning this house would not restore it to its former glory.

One of the walls in the west wing was crumbling, and more than a few windows needed replacing. The upper most floors had a terrible draft, and when it rained I had to leave out buckets to catch water in the servants' quarters. Not that we had any servants left to us. She had slowly dismissed all our help as the years went on and her coffers depleted.

Sometimes I dreamed of running away from it all. Leaving this place behind and never looking back.

I wondered what my life could look like beyond these crumbling walls. I liked to bake, perhaps I could be a baker's wife in a small village far from this tiny hamlet? Mayhap a rich nobleman would hire me as a governess? I certainly had the skill set and training. Or, I might fall in love, have a hundred children, and be a better mother to my children than my stepmother had ever been.

There were so many possibilities.

Any of them would be better than being trapped here.

If only I could break free. But I was not brave enough to try.

I cursed my cowardice and steeled myself for another day.

The tedium loomed before me. I knew what would await me downstairs. More of the same: endless tasks, endless commands. Scrubbing floors that never stayed clean, preparing tasteless tea for thankless girls who never drank it, and dodging the sharp tongue of my stepmother. Her cold glare and biting words chilled me more than the morning air; every interaction with her felt like weeding through a thicket of thorns. Her words were barbs, constantly snagging and scratching at you. The cuts were not deep, but they stung all the same.

The bell rang out again, this time more insistent, joined by cries from my demanding stepmother. Jolted from my thoughts, reality came flooding back in like a wave crashing over me.

"Ella! Wake up, girl! Bring the tea!"

I sighed in frustration, knowing there would be consequences for lingering when summoned this morning. Still, I rolled my eyes—something I would never attempt outside the safety of this tower for fear of being backhanded. I knew it was impertinent and disrespectful to have such thoughts, but sometimes I couldn't help but let my frustrations spill

out. Years of punishment for my impertinence has taught me to hold my tongue.

Finally peeling myself away from the makeshift pallet that I called a mattress, I rose to greet another day. The cool air wrapped around me, and I shivered slightly as my feet hit the wooden floor. I stumbled toward the wash basin that stood in the corner of the room.

The chill of the water shocked me awake as I washed my hands and face. I stared at my sorrowful reflection in the murky surface—tired eyes stared back at me. I dipped my hands into the water, obscuring my reflection, forcing myself to look away from the hopelessness I recognized in my expression.

I didn't have time to linger on such thoughts.

I pulled on a dress over my chemise, the coarse blue wool faded and fraying at the edges, threadbare from so many wears. It was a tattered day dress that had once belonged to my half sister Analissa, handed down to me only when the style was fully out of season and the hems were worn raw.

My stepmother never gave me any new fabrics or took me to the modiste to be fitted for fashionable gowns. She never let me forget that I was not her true daughter, and I would never be treated as such.

“Ella!” I heard her shrill call for me through the floor and winced as it pulled me from my morning meditation.

I wanted nothing more than to lay back down and return to my dreams, but I could hear the familiar shrieks of my sisters downstairs and knew I was already behind for the day. If I lingered, I was sure to earn more than her scorn.

I opened the heavy door, revealing a tight corner that dropped into a steep staircase. I hesitated as I stepped over the threshold, pausing just long enough to reach back for a small storybook that sat atop my meager stack.

The book was an old favorite of mine, a collection of folk tales for children, full of wild stories about princesses and fairies. It was one of the last books he had gifted me from his travels, and precious to me.

I thought maybe I could find a spare moment or two between chores to sneak in a few pages. Just a quick escape from the daily drudgery. I tucked it into my apron pocket, arranging my skirts to hide its stiffness. Lowering my head I ducked past the low doorway and began my descent. I

flew down the stairs as fast as I dared, the ancient wooden planks creaking beneath my feet.

As I counted steps, I numbered off my list of tasks for the day—fetch water from the well, prepare the tea, feed the chickens, milk the cows, polish the silver, mop the floor . . . M y life was a tiresome gyre, every day just as the ones before, all of them blending into the next like the colors of the sunset I never had the chance to see.

But at least I had my books. They offered me an escape, a bit of magic to brighten my mundane life.

I loved my books. Books were my safe place.

I loved falling into a good story. I loved being whisked away from my life with a fantastical tale of adventure and magic. In books, I could lose myself.

I would often sneak a page or two during my chores: a paragraph while the chickens fed, a page while the tea was steeping. Sometimes I could finish a whole story while stepmother and the girls were out on errands. Those were the best days, when it was just me escaping into a good book.

My stepmother hated my books. She said they distracted me from my real duties, and that I shouldn't waste my time reading fantasy and poppycock. But try as she might to ban books, flowers, and fun from this household, she could never make me stop dreaming.

Two

As I wound my way through the halls of the estate, I thought about the ghosts that plagued these halls. The happy life I had known with my parents had shattered years ago, when they had left this world. Memories haunted me at every corner, reminding me of a life I would never again have.

My mother's porcelain vase still perched in an alcove, gathering dust. Once upon a time it had been the centerpiece at every dinner, filled with beautiful flowers from the garden; now, it sat unused and forgotten.

I passed by what had once been a library and remembered the glorious sight of it when it had been filled from floor to ceiling with rare books. Now it was just another unused sitting room.

As if the estate needed yet another room for *that* .

It felt like an eternity had passed without my parents, and yet, it felt as if it were only yesterday we had been a joyous little trio. I could still hear my fathers laughter booming through the halls and still smell the perfume of my mothers roses. I remember how my father delighted in surprising her with little gifts, bouquets of flowers or small trinkets from his travels, tokens of his affection.

He always brought me something too. Exotic candies, beautiful dolls. I loved it most when he brought home books. He had an extensive collection—his library was cluttered with baubles and books on every subject I could conjure. History and philosophy texts, maps and scrolls; even novels had a place in my father's library.

My favorites were the fairy-tale books. Colorful books recounting wild legends about brave knights fighting dragons and fairies granting wishes with a wave of their wands. Magic and mystery ruled over those realms, and I was lured by the whimsy. I loved the nights when my mother would read the stories aloud to us by firelight. I would listen, mesmerized by the fantastical tales and the lull of her voice.

There was one story about *The Tricky Fairy Queen's Teacup* . That was my father's favorite because it was full of mishaps and hijinks. Another told the legend of *The Celestial Fairies* , and how all the stars in

the night sky were born of fairy wishes. That was my mother's favorite because of the kindness shown by the fairies.

My favorite was always the story of *The Flower Fairy* :

Once upon a time there was a lovely young maiden. She was very lonely, and she longed to find her true love. One day, as she was out picking daisies, she plucked a petal and made a wish from her heart. "I am so lonely," she said, "I wish I could find my true love." A fairy bloomed from the flower and, with a wave of her wand, transformed the girl into a budding bride. Before the girl knew it, a handsome prince appeared on a horse and swept her off her feet. They rode into the sunset and lived happily ever after, all thanks to the generosity of the fairy.

It was my favorite story, and I had read it more times than I could count. As a child, I loved the whimsy and romance of the story. But as I grew older, I began to wonder, what was so great about the prince? What happened after the story? Most of all, I wondered about the fairy.

I knew the story was just that: a story. But sometimes I let myself fantasize about what I would wish for, if a fairy ever offered me such a gift.

When I was younger, I might have wished for something as fanciful as finding true love. Now my dreams were simpler.

I would wish for a day to myself. Time to lounge in bed in the morning. To have my tea served to me in bed, hot. To luxuriate in a rose water bath and read a book by the fire.

But no. It was dangerous to wish for so much. Those sorts of wishes were not for the likes of me.

I blinked and cleared my mind of my wild imaginings. Fairies were fantasies, and wishing was fishing for disappointment.

With a lurch I remembered who and what I was.

An orphan, a servant.

I was no one.

How quickly I had gone from having everything to nothing.

I still remember the day my mother succumbed to that terrible fever, how quickly she had faded, leaving a gaping emptiness in our hearts that could never be filled.

That had been a dark year. Tears were shed. The mirrors were covered. The house received no visitors, my father and I wore only black.

But when our year of mourning was up, my father felt there was only one path before him.

He tried to do the right thing by remarrying, convinced that a new wife could be a mother to me. I was still only a child, he said. I did not yet comprehend the ways of the world. I needed a mother to guide me, to teach me the ways of womanhood.

The very next year he returned from his travels with a cart full of silk and a new wife.

He must have known that the void in his heart would never be filled, but I think he hoped that mine could be, if only I had a mother again, if only our lives could return to what they once were.

But he was wrong.

Try as he might, my mother could never be replaced.

Certainly never by a woman as callous as my stepmother. She was unlike my mother in every way: She was hard where my mother had been soft, bitter while my mother had been all sweetness. My father had never cared for her, and she begrudged my mother and me for holding his heart. She realized too late why he had remarried; she was merely a replacement mother, and she resented the role. It was difficult for her. She wasn't the motherly type.

Her coldness wrapped around this house like a vice. Under her thumb, everything changed. There were no more picnics in the garden. No more stories by firelight. Dinners became solemn etiquette lessons. There were no more gifts, no more laughter, no more roses.

Without my mother, my father became a ghost of himself. And then the fever came for him too, and I was left alone.

Well, not entirely alone.

Alone would have been bearable.

I was left with *her*. My wicked stepmother.

And then *she* became *them*. Analissa and Drusilla came wailing into this world shortly after my father had breathed his last breath. Children were meant to be a blessing, but she treated hers as if they were a burden. Me more than anyone. My sisters were reminders of her struggle, a woman going at it alone.

I had no other family to petition to take me in after my parents left this world, and so my stepmother became my sole guardian. She was never

a mother to me. She gave me a roof over my head and a place to sleep at night, but I was not treated as a daughter.

Slowly, she stripped me of everything that had once brought me joy. She purged the house of my mother's belongings and my father's treasures, selling off anything and everything to the highest bidder. I watched as neighbors carried off paintings and tapestries, trunks full of my mother's gowns, and emptied my father's library, stealing off with the things that made this their home. Even the silver candlesticks were pawned off and the funds used to buy more tasteless gowns and gaudy jewels.

Everything, save my memories. Those she could never take from me.

My bedroom had been given to Analissa, and I had been moved to the attic. After dwindling my father's fortune on expensive gowns and fanciful furnishings, she began dismissing staff, appropriating more and more of the household burden to my shoulders. I became the scullery, the cook, and the footman. I had become nothing more than a servant in my own home.

I shook my head to clear the awful memories that plagued me. I tried not to think about how my life had become such endless torment—the reminders of what I had lost were far too painful.

As I passed through the yard to gather water at the well, I gave a curt nod to Lucas. He lived nearby and was one of the few people my stepmother kept in her employ. He would come by once a week to bridle the horses and drive the ladies of the home to town in our old, battered carriage.

Never me. If I had to go into town, I walked.

Dropping the bucket down, I avoided looking at the tangled mess of overgrown hedges and decaying flowers that had once been my mother's garden.

Once upon a time, we had spent sun-drenched afternoons picnicking in the garden, the air fragrant with blossoms, and the evenings were filled with family dinners, where my father's hearty laughter mixed with my mother's gentle smile.

But no longer.

One white rose reached out for me, one beautiful pearl amidst a sea of sand. I plucked it from the vine and inhaled its sweet scent, losing

myself in one small moment of beauty.

It wasn't much, sniffing a lone flower, but it was moments like this that kept me looking for the beauty in this ugly place.

I heaved the pail back up, water splashing my skirts as I hoisted it over the edge and hauled it back to the kitchen. I dashed around the cluttered counters, rushing to boil the water. I dropped the flower into a narrow crystal vase and placed it at the center of the tray. It stood tall and proud, a vision of beauty amidst the dullness.

By the time I was finished the bell had ceased its ringing, and I knew that to be a poor omen.

I sighed. I imagined how it might be if for once, just once, I was the one enjoying my tea hot.

Three

With a deep breath, I steeled myself, knowing the day's work would be long and my stepmother's temper would not soften. I grimaced, clutching the tea tray, and silently pushed open the door to the drawing room to find my stepmother and sisters gathered around the pianoforte . Analissa clumsily plucked out a tune while Drusilla sang—or, attempted to sing—a sorrowful rendition of *Cendrillon* . Stepmother stood over the pair, clicking her tongue and shaking her head at each wrong note played.

“Drusilla, you sound like a turkey garbling in the rain. Perhaps try not to open your mouth quite so much,” Stepmother ribbed, never one to miss the opportunity to sling an insult. Even, or especially, at one's own flesh and blood.

“I can't sing with a closed mouth, Mother,” Drusilla quipped back in a sing-song voice laced with attitude.

“Mmm,” Stepmother intoned, clicking her tongue again. “Perhaps that would be for the best,” she mused, seemingly reconsidering her delusions of making either of the girls accomplished musicians. “Perhaps try humming, dearest,” she said with her usual bite.

Drusilla only scowled and continued her singing, albeit at a lower volume. The girls were used to their mother's criticism, and rather talented at appearing unbothered by her cruelty.

I actually felt pity for my sisters. They would always be chasing her love, and they would never receive it. My stepmother was incapable of love. And the girls had grown up cruel like her because it was all they knew. Hurt people hurt people, and my sisters were a prime example of it.

Long lines of steam rose into the air as I prepared the first two teacups with cream and sugar and set them on the table, turning them to hide the chipping edges from my stepmother's critical eye. I left the third black and handed it to my stepmother just as she was settling herself into the threadbare chair at the head of the table.

My father's chair.

I didn't think I would ever get over the shock of seeing her sitting in his chair. She liked it, to assume the head of the household spot. It made

her feel powerful, I thought, as if just by sitting in his seat she could assume his position.

It was also possible that she did it because she knew how much I hated it.

My hands began to tremble with anger, but I knew better than to speak. It would only lead to trouble.

Our eyes met as I passed her the teacup and I hastily looked away, afraid to meet her head-on. I didn't want to start another argument over this chair.

Instead, I busied myself with clearing away the tray, feeling foolish for letting her rile me. I should be used to her games by now. In an effort to calm myself I greeted her with an over eager cheerfulness.

"Good morning, Mother." I instantly kicked myself for the slip.

"How many times have I told you, Ella? I am your *step*-mother," she chastised, putting emphasis on the *step*. "You may refer to me as such. Or, you may address me as Lady Ashwell, if it pleases you," she finished with a smirk. She loved to remind me of her title as lady of the estate.

It was meant as a specific insult to my mother's memory and it never ceased to make me bristle.

She took the teacup, leaving me with the saucer.

"I am sorry, Stepmother," I responded meekly, placing the saucer down before her with a clink.

"You slept in," Stepmother rebuked me tonelessly.

I looked at the floor, studying the intricate tangle of vines that was woven into the rug. I bit my lip to stop myself from speaking.

I had hoped she would let it go, that just for once, I might have taken a late morning for myself. Did I not do enough around this place? Could I not even have a few minutes to myself to linger in bed?

This will mean more chores, as punishment for my laziness.

"I stayed up past lantern light scrubbing the floors like you asked," I said, defensively, biting my lip to keep from saying more.

"Do not sass me, girl!" she shouted, slamming her cup down with such force that it spilled over the edge, sloshing onto the table. Her temper flares were abrupt and forceful, and even now I found it hard to predict what would set her off.

I still wasn't sure what she was truly angry about. My delay? My slip of the tongue? My sass? Or something else completely?

It did not matter. She would take her anger out on me, nonetheless. I steeled myself for yet another tongue-lashing.

“Have I not taken you in and raised you? Do I not feed you and clothe you? Do you not have a roof over your head?”

“Yes, Stepmother.”

“And this is how you repay my many kindnesses? With sullen laziness and backtalk?”

I looked down, breaking eye contact with her. I was fearful of her wrath when she was in a foul mood such as this one.

“All I require is a little bit of help around this house; is that truly so much to ask of you?”

“No, Stepmother,”

“No,” she parroted, satisfied and smug now that she had cowed me. I shrugged it off, familiar with her lectures. I gathered the tray and turned to go back to the kitchen when someone abruptly wrenched me by my elbow with such force that I dropped the tray in shock. It clattered to the floor, dishes and cookies flying around the room in an explosion.

“What is that,” my stepmother ground out, her infatuation swelling so quickly that it caught me by surprise.

“I—I—” I stuttered, unsure of what precisely had ignited her fury.

Analissa and Drusilla carried on with their recital, seemingly unaware or unbothered by the squabble currently happening at the tea table.

“*That*,” she demanded, reaching into my apron and plucking the book out from its hiding place. “I thought I told you to stop reading these ridiculous books.”

No, not the book. Any book but that one, I thought as I reached for it instinctively, ready to snatch it back from her greedy hands. My mind scrambled to think of something—anything—I could say to convince her to give it back.

Sensing its value, she latched onto it. She turned away from me, keeping the book just out of my sight. Challenging me to seize it back. I forced myself to take a step away from her, thinking if I could remain indifferent to the book she would leave it be. Instead, she feigned a sudden interest in its contents, scratching a pointed index finger along the delicate lettering on the spine.

“These old fairy tales again?” she mocked. “I have told you many times before, Ella, these are nothing but fables and poppycock.”

She forced me to watch as she riffled through the pages with greasy fingers, snickering at the names of the stories that I held so dear.

“Oops,” she said, deliberately tearing a page from the center of the book. I shuddered as it fell to the floor, clenching my fists to keep myself from diving after the single leaf of paper.

“As if you need any more distractions from your daily tasks,” she said flippantly. With a flick of her wrist, she tossed the book into the fireplace so rapidly that I hadn’t had time to guess at her intentions.

“No!” I screamed, lunging myself into the fireplace after the tome, but she caught me and held me back.

Analissa and Drusilla moved in on us, finally alerted to our scuffle. It took the three of them together to wrestle me away from the hearth as I kicked and clawed at them, watching helplessly as the flames curled around the pages of my beloved stories. My father’s final gift, turned to soot, nothing now but mere poppycock.

Only when the book was unsalvageable did they finally release me. I fell to the floor in a heap. It was all I could manage not to burst into tears in front of them.

My stepmother straightened her skirts, unfazed by the bedlam that had just swept through her drawing room. She motioned to the mess of biscuits and dishes strewn around the room, purposely stepping on the white rose and grinding it to shreds beneath her muddy heel. “Clean this mess up, girl. And when you are finished, you’ll need to mop the foyer again. It seems someone tramped in with muddy shoes this morning. It’s an utter disgrace,” she trailed off, doing little to hide a smirk.

I held my eyes shut tight, wishing for her to belay her incessant hounding. *Please, please just stop. Just leave me alone.*

“After that, remember to sweep out the fireplaces, polish the mirrors, and . . . Oh! Do be sure to beat the rugs, especially in this room.” She stomped the toe of a muddied boot, leaving a tiny, dusty footprint on my father’s imported Turkish rug. I looked up at her, my rage simmering. She dared me to challenge her, to say something. When I feebly bowed my head lower to hide my tears, she turned on her heel, satisfied.

“Come, girls, we have an appointment at the modiste,” she called while snapping her fingers, signaling them like trained dogs.

“But I didn’t have time to drink my tea!” Analissa whined.

At the same time, Drusilla rushed past me, snagging a cookie from the table as Analissa greedily drained her cup and dropped it carelessly onto the table.

I fixated on the fire, immobilized by the horror of what had just happened. I watched as the embers of the book glowed red before sputtering out, leaving tiny piles of graying ash behind. My beloved stories, crumbling to ash.

They all swept out of the room and left me kneeling, alone, with not even my book to keep my company.

Four

The morning had been a long one, spent bent over more muddy footprints. I plunged my rag into the bucket of soapy water and turned to scrub one final shoe print that seemed to be just about the size of my stepmother's boot.

I felt my anger rise, but I was well trained at suppressing it. I took a steadying breath and returned to my task.

My knees pressed into the cold tiles as I scrubbed the floor with a fervor that left my back aching. I poured my frustration into my work, humming while I scrubbed, letting the repetition lull me.

The sound of a carriage clattering up the drive tore me out of my reverie, and I sat back on my heels, admiring my work.

There . I wiped my brow with relief. *Finished, just in time.*

I stood and stretched, arching my spine and tilting my head from side to side, wincing at the strain that accompanied each small movement. Each pull of my body screamed with fatigue, reminding me I was just a weary young woman wrestling with dust and dirt.

I could hear the raucous laughter of my sisters as they tumbled from the carriage. Any moment the three of them would barge through the front door in mud-splattered skirts and traipse across the floors I had spent all morning mopping at their behest. And then I would have to mop it all again.

My life stretched out before me, an endless cycle of cleaning and cruelty and loneliness.

I wanted to cry.

Just not in front of *them* .

As I had expected, the three plowed through the door, arms laden with packages that they threw in haphazard piles in the entry. They traipsed past me without a glance, leaving a new trail of dusty footprints behind for me to mop up.

I sighed, sinking my rag back into the bucket.

I lost myself in the scrubbing, humming a simple tune to myself. Just as I wiped my brow and leaned over to wrangle with a particularly stubborn spot of dirt, a knock startled me from my task.

I wondered briefly who could possibly be calling, and for which of the girls? We never had callers. Perhaps Analissa had caught the eye of some unlucky suitor? Or perhaps it was simply a messenger from the modiste, returning a forgotten glove. Drusilla had a tendency to forget her belongings everywhere she went. It was unlikely to be a social call, as neither the girls nor my stepmother kept to any sort of social calendar.

I pushed myself up off the floor, a ripple of relief rolling through me as I straightened my aching shoulders. There was no time to revel in the respite—I dashed to the door, wiping my dirty hands on my apron.

I opened the door, and to my absolute amazement, a royal messenger stood before me, clad in red velvet and bearing the golden seal of the king himself.

I dropped into a low curtsy and stared down at my feet, suddenly hyper-aware of my toes peeking out of the holes in my worn-out slippers.

The man bid me to rise up. He held out an envelope sealed with red wax, bearing the royal crest of the king.

“To all young ladies of the home,” he announced, his voice carrying a weight of importance. “You are cordially invited to attend a Royal Ball celebrating Prince Henrik and his safe return.”

It was well-known that the prince had been abroad for some years, no-doubt living out his youth and waiting to inherit the crown. Perhaps this ball was to signal a new beginning for the kingdom. Not that it mattered to me, for what did I care for the doings of the royals?

I thanked the messenger, and reached out to take the letter.

As I did, the man leaned in, baring his teeth at me in what he no doubt considered a charming smile. He was dressed in royal finery, but I didn't like the way he was eyeing me. I shifted my weight, unsure of how to distance myself from him and still accept his missive.

I forced myself to focus on the parchment in hand instead of the way his eyes leeringly drifted over my body.

“Everyone is invited—young and old, rich and poor—even servants,” he finished, grinning. I wanted to slam the door in his face for his presumption, but I knew no one would ever believe the truth: that this was my father's estate, and I was no servant.

“How generous of His Royal Highness,” I said, suppressing a huff at the audacity of it all. What generosity, indeed, inviting all the women in the kingdom to line up for his amusement.

The messenger lowered his voice to a husky timbre that made me cringe. “I would hope to see such a beautiful maiden as yourself in attendance,” he said with a wink before turning and mounting his horse.

I snatched the letter from him and crossed my arms, now too-aware of just how much my worn skirts and tattered apron revealed.

Thankfully he retreated, mounting his horse in one swift stride.

“I shall look for you!” he called back brazenly as he kicked his steed into a canter and disappeared down the drive.

I watched him prance away and rolled my eyes at the antics of men. I knew I would not be attending any balls; my stepmother would never allow it. For once, I was grateful—not attending the ball meant not having to dodge the lecherous looks of the likes of *him*.

A small mercy, at least.

Truthfully, I didn’t care about the prince, and I didn’t care about a ball. But . . . if everyone went to the ball, I would have one blissful night to myself.

A smile bloomed across my face as I allowed myself to fantasize about having just one night off from *them*.

Wild ideas began unfurling as I let the fantasy carry me downstream. How wonderful it would be to have one night for myself. No one ordering me around, no one making demands. No cleaning, no cooking, just a night of peace and quiet. One night of relaxation—what pure joy that would be! What would I do with such luxury? My mind raced as I thought of all the things I would do with one night of freedom. I could take a nap. I could read a book. I could take a bath in the clawfoot tub and drink my tea hot. I could touch myself, for as long as I wanted, and no bells would interrupt me.

Or, I could run away.

I could. I could do it.

I could plan an elaborate escape plan. I could leave this place and make a life for myself somewhere far, far away. Surely some innkeeper would hire me on as a maid? I had plenty of experience. Perhaps some homely farmer could make me a wife, and I could spend my days comfortably, tending to his children and milking his cows. I would live humbly, but anything would be better than being trapped here for the rest of my days. The beauty of possibility bloomed before me and my heart lifted, hopeful for the first time in a long time.

But I couldn't even let myself enjoy the fantasy of it before guilt choked me and made me remember myself. I couldn't just abandon this home. I could no easier turn my back and walk away from it than carve out my own heart.

I felt trapped, stuck between a rock and a hard place. I wanted to escape, and yet, I could not bring myself to take a step out of this comfort zone.

Just then, my sisters shoved through the door, their bickering ripping me out of my daydream.

They froze when they saw the envelope in my hand, the royal seal setting them off in a deafening fit of squeals and squalls.

"Mother! Mother! Oh, oh!" Analissa screeched, snatching the missive.

"Mama! Make haste!" Drusilla chimed in, the two of them creating a cacophony that could undoubtedly be heard all the way from the palace.

My stepmother rushed in breathless. "What madness possesses you? Must you screech like a thousand cawing crows? Your wailing could shatter glass!"

They could not gather their wits or their words, and they tumbled over their tongues, unable to string a single sentence together. Analissa waved the letter around in the air and my stepmother plucked it out of Analissa's clutch, tearing through the seal with a swift slice of her forefinger.

"Who delivered this?" she demanded, pointing her glare toward me.

I found myself as tongue-tied as the girls under my stepmother's ruthless stare, and she huffed in exasperation at our incompetence.

The girls quieted as my stepmother's eyes scanned the letter. Her mouth twisted up into a wicked smile and then she too was cawing, much like a crow.

"Girls, there is *much* to be done. There is to be a royal ball," she declared.

Analissa and Drusilla synched their shrieks of excitement as they linked arms and spun each other around the room.

My stepmother held up one hand, effectively silencing them. They held hands as she continued quietly scanning the piece of parchment, and the suspense was palpable.

Then she surprised me. She actually smiled. The cold, heartless stepmother that I knew was grinning.

“You are to meet the prince himself,” she announced, splaying her arms wide in victory. She cradled the letter as if it were a precious diamond, folding it just so and tucking it into the pocket of her chatelaine.

My sisters resumed their dance, erupting into a fit of squeals and squalls. Meanwhile, I sank into the corner of the room, trying as best I could to blend into the tapestries.

“Girls! Compose yourselves. Go and change out of those morning dresses, dress yourselves sensibly for town. We must make haste to the modiste if you are to have new gowns for the ball. Now!” She clapped, spurring them into a flurry of movement. My sisters bounded up the stairs, giddy with excitement.

I turned toward the cloakroom, but my stepmother stepped in front of me, blocking my path.

“You,” she glowered at me with pure hatred. “You aren't fit to mop the palace floors, let alone dance on them in those disgraceful slippers of yours. So don't get any ridiculous notions about attending this ball. You will not be going, and that is final.”

I breathed a sigh of relief. *Good*. I didn't want to go to the ball.

She mistook my relief for a sigh of disappointment, and that was all it took to return to her jovial spirits.

“Now, go and instruct Lucas to re-harness the horses. It seems we will be going out again,” she reflected, taking on an air of mock exasperation. Clearly, she was enjoying this.

She was still chatting away, contentedly tallying a growing list of tasks, as I turned to find Lucas in the stables.

Five

The next two weeks passed in a whirl of excitement and endless preparations. My stepmother's illusions of grandeur ran wild as she fantasized about the prince choosing one of my silly sisters to be a bride, whisking them all away to live in the placate happily ever after. She painted a picture so romantic that anyone would get swept up in the dream of it all.

The poor girls believed their mother's plan would be executed flawlessly: They would arrive in a gilded carriage; the prince would kiss their hands and offer them a single red rose; they would spend the night twirling around the dance floor, the envy of every maiden, the obsession of the prince himself. The three of them came up with all manner of fantastical scenarios, so much so that I thought they would have a fair hand at writing a book of poppycock.

But with illusions of grandeur came a grand list of demands. Not only must I keep up with my regular duties, but I was expected to play maidservant to the girls now as well. I found myself running baths and brushing hair, none of which had ever been expected of me before.

Not only that, but the modiste had been fully booked by the other, much higher-ranking ladies of the kingdom, and so seamstress was tacked onto my pile of tasks. I worked my hands numb stitching seams and lacing corsets well past lamplight, pricking my finger with needles as I tried to keep up with the sewing. Each day I rose with the dawn, finding ever-growing piles of petticoats and stockings strewn across the landing, all apparently in need of immediate mending. Each night, I practiced curling my sister's hair with hot rags, burning my fingertips on the scalding curlers, and tended to my spoiled sisters' endless whims.

But there were moments without my stepmother, when it was just the three of us sisters, when the air would be filled with laughter as we practiced hairstyles and tried to follow the patterns from *Les Modes Parisiennes*, and I could almost forget the ways they tormented me in front of their mother. For those fleeting afternoons, I felt like part of the group, sharing secrets and giggles, reveling in the simple joy of

sisterhood. But the fantasy would shatter every time Stepmother swept in, her icy scowl a stark reminder that I wasn't really one of them.

My fantasy about running away had been forgotten amidst all the hustle and bustle. I was just looking forward to these preparations being over so I could have a night off.

Analissa and Drusilla spent their time practicing their curtsies in front of the mirror, giggling about all the dashing young noblemen they hoped to attract, pinching their cheeks to find the perfect pressure to apply for a blushing shade of pink.

My stepmother was worse than usual. She spent her time criticizing and critiquing their every quality and flaw. They needed to stand straighter, speak softer, eat less, smile more. It was a respite from her criticisms of me, at least. But I couldn't help but feel a pang of sympathy for them.

My sisters may be loud and obnoxious and silly, but I could see within them a certain glamor their mother had been blinded to.

They were strong.

So many times they had been knocked down and insulted, and yet they did not become discouraged. They had little to recommend them, and yet, they were happy with themselves. They did not allow their mother's cruelty to affect them in the same way I did, and I envied them for that gift of forgetting and forgiving.

Perhaps ignorance truly was bliss.

Six

The evening of the ball finally arrived and my sisters were bursting at the seams. Both were silly with giddiness and held high expectations for dancing with the prince. I doubted that either would be selected for a dance with His Royal Highness but thought perhaps the lecherous messenger would offer his hand for a set.

My fingers focused on pinning up the hem of Drusilla's dress, while Analissa perched on the settee, fiddling with her hair and readjusting her gown.

"There," I said cheerily, "just one more stitch, and you'll look fabulous for the ball tonight, Drusilla.

"Fabulous enough to steal the prince away from Analissa, I hope," Drusilla teased. I could not hide my smile and I chortled, feeling for a moment like I was included in the fun.

"Oh, please!" Analissa quipped. "I shall be the shining star of the ball with these sapphires," she mused, fingering the gaudy gems wrapped around her throat.

"If you don't blind him first," Drusilla laughed, stretching her arms out to spin her sister in a good-humored twirl.

"At least if I blind him he won't be distracted by the sight of *you!*"

I laughed along with them, the anticipation of the evening making all three of us giggly. I was so eager for them to leave I was nearly dizzy.

By the time we were finished primping and priming, my sisters looked like frosted cakes, and I wondered at how they would fit through the ballroom doors, or into the carriage, for that matter. I had worked tirelessly over the last fortnight creating a hodgepodge of mismatched fabrics into two overdone gowns. Bows and ruffles covered every inch of their skirts, though the bodices dipped shockingly low. So much fabric made the gowns enormous and nearly unmanageable, and I just hoped neither of the girls lost their footing under the monstrosities.

But as I watched them admire their own reflections with bright eyes and wide smiles, I felt like a fairy godmother, transforming them both into visions of beauty. I stood back and admired my handiwork.

Analissa steadied herself and readjusted the sleeves that ballooned around her shoulders. The high-puffed sleeves stood in stark contrast to the low neckline of her gown. It was an utterly unique garment, and I was sure she would turn heads tonight.

Drusilla's mousy brown hair had been curled and gathered at the top of her head. She had chosen a mismatch of bejeweled barrettes and insisted I pile them all into her coiffure, and I was quite proud of the way I had fit them together rather like a puzzle, creating a sort of makeshift tiara. It was garish, but it made her happy.

I thought of their girlish hopes to dance with a prince. I couldn't relate to wanting to dance, but I could relate to having a dream. *How exciting it must be to have grand hopes and dreams*, I thought to myself.

Just then my stepmother poked her head into the room, her sharp eye enough to put a quick end to any frivolity. A solemn weight settled in my chest as the sisterly moment we'd all shared was shattered.

"What's all this foolish twittering I hear? Keep your breath to swell your song, ladies."

I stiffened at her tone, and Drusilla and Analissa swiftly adjusted themselves to their mother's presence.

"Oh, we were just having a laugh, Mother."

"Enough. Come on, girls. Don't waste your good humor on the likes of Ella. We need every ounce of charm for the prince," she instructed, snapping her fingers and rushing the pair from the room. She did not follow them, but instead lingered in the doorway, her eyes narrowing to slits.

I could feel the animosity between us, amplifying every sound, every quiet breath. In the stillness, it was just me and my wicked stepmother, the palpable tension between us like a thick fog.

I avoided her gaze, acutely aware of how even the tiniest rustle of fabric seemed to echo in the suffocating silence. I moved to begin tidying the room, gathering robes and ribbons that had been thrown about haphazardly in the chaos of getting ready.

Her heels clacked against the wood floorboards as she closed the distance between us, pointing a sharp index finger into my face.

"I expect you *behave*," she ground out, her mouth severe.

I clutched the garments, as if the thin bundle of fabric was enough of a barrier between me and her hate.

“Best not try anything tricky tonight,” she warned, her tone laced with venom, her breath hot against my skin. “If you dare try to sneak out, or worse, try to sneak somebody in tonight while we are away . . .”

I balked, incredulous.

She thought . . . what, exactly? That I had some secret dalliance I was hiding from her? That I wanted to have a romp in the haystacks with that slimy messenger? Tonight, of all nights? As if I had time for any moonlit romance, as busy as she kept me. And if I did, what did it matter to her? It was laughable. Ridiculous.

If I wasn’t so furious I might have snickered.

“What exactly is that supposed to mean?” I fumed, furious at her accusations. I don’t know why, of all the things she had said over the years, all the abuse she had put me through, this is the one that angered me most.

Her expression twisted into a scowl, and I could see the displeasure simmering just beneath the surface. “Don’t play coy with me, girl. I have seen how you look at that stable boy. And I saw you flirting with that messenger. Don’t think I don’t know a wanton when I see one.”

Her words were scandalous slander.

For a moment I was too stunned to speak. I stood there, mouth agape, as I processed her disgusting claims. Not only were they untrue, they were disgraceful. Did she honestly believe her own lies?

For once, I could not contain my outrage.

“I am no wanton!” I protested, unable to voice all of the things I really wanted to say. How many times had I played this moment over in my head, thinking of all the things I would confront her about if I ever worked up the nerve? This was my chance, and I couldn’t find my voice.

She pounced.

“You are a shameless slut!” she screamed. I had rarely seen this magnitude of furor, even from her. It frightened me and I shrank away from her, but she continued to advance on me until I was cornered.

Despite my fear of her, I planted my feet and raised myself to my full height. She was taller than me, but just the shift in body language was enough to make her stop inching forward. I held my ground and claimed space, forcing her to look at me. Begging her to see me.

I could not let her win.

It threw her, and she began talking faster, almost rambling, in her insulting tone. But the words no longer reached me.

“If I catch even a whiff of any foolishness, I—I—” she stammered, unable to think of a punishment harsh enough.

“You’ll what? Punish me with more chores? Burn more of my books?” I mocked. There was little she could still do to me that she had not yet done.

It shocked her, my brazen insolence. It took her a moment to think, stunned by my outburst. But she finally came up with something.

“I will lock you in that tower and throw away the key!” she shrieked.

She was mad.

But I was mad, too.

“You think I’m afraid of being locked up? I’d rather be locked in that dark attic for the rest of my living days than deal with your cruelty for even one more night,” I spat, unsure of what boldness had seized me.

In a flash, her hand connected with my cheek, and a sharp sting sent me reeling backwards. I fell to the ground, pain and confusion twisting within me as I brought my hand up to cup my stinging face.

“You impertinent little wretch! How dare you speak to me like that, after everything I have done for you,” she hissed, her eyes blazing as she stood over me. The fireplace cracked hot behind me, and for a moment I feared she might push me in, like the evil witch in the gingerbread story.

“Remember your place, Ella. You are nothing more than a dirty little orphan girl with nowhere else to go. This is *my* home, and you are bound to it. Which means you are bound to *me*.”

Her words sliced me deep with their truth. She was right. I *was* bound to this place. Not in the way that she meant: I was sure I could plot an escape if I really wanted to.

But I didn’t really want to.

My heart would not let me leave this place. I could not let go of my home. And she loved to use it against me, time and time again.

“Besides,” she cackled, her mood suddenly shifting to smug satisfaction now that she had sufficiently degraded me. “You’re just a dirty little cinder slut. You can fuck every stable boy in the country, and still, none of them would make an honest woman out of you. You have nothing of value to offer anyone. You will never be free of this place. You have

nowhere else to go, Cinder-Ella. You're destined to remain here, scrubbing my floors for the rest of your miserable life!"

The words hung in the air between us, stinging me more than her slap. Tears welled in my eyes, but I refused to cry in front of her.

Only when I heard the clack of her footsteps echoing down the hallway and the slam of a door did I find the strength to rise. On shaky legs I stumbled through the house, hot tears streaming down my face as I fled.

My chest tightened, suffocating me as I struggled to catch my breath. My heart twisted in a swirling storm of so many conflicting emotions—years of pent-up rage bubbled over, spilling out like a cup of overpoured tea.

I remembered my plot to run away, but where could I possibly go? My stepmother was right; I had no one, no place to seek refuge, no one who would take me in. No one to protect me. Perhaps I should have allowed that royal messenger to sweep me off my feet . . . then, maybe, I would have given myself a chance at escaping this life.

But there would be no prince in shining armor in my story.

I was completely and utterly alone.

Seven

I stumbled through the dark, finding my way over pebbled paths to where the moss-eaten fountain stood decaying and crumbling, a forgotten relic of better times. It must have been subconscious, my need to go somewhere safe and unbothered, because I didn't remember how I got there.

The moon hung heavy and full in the night sky, casting a hazy glow around the garden.

I sank to the ground, the cool earth centering me as I let my misery spill forth like a kettle boiling over. I let my tears fall, the weight of loneliness crushing me.

When I had finally cried myself hoarse, I looked around at the forgotten garden around me. I couldn't remember the last time I had found a spare minute to sit by the fountain. It had been far too long.

Creeping vines of ivy twisted and curled around each other, choking flower beds that now lay suffocating beneath a sea of weeds. In some areas, patches of earth lay barren and cracked, as if the earth had given up hope altogether. The cloying scent of damp soil and rot carried on the air. Broken branches arched overhead, their skeletal frames clawing at the sky. I could almost hear the whispers of what this place used to be, lost beneath the wildness of it.

I had forgotten this place, allowed myself to forget, and in doing so, forgotten myself.

I thought about my mother and what this garden had meant to her. What it had meant to us. My love of flowers is rooted in hers, in this very garden, and I realized how much this garden meant to me as well. I had forgotten all of it.

I no longer stopped to smell the roses, just as I no longer read the few books that remained to me. I was afraid. Afraid because when I allowed myself to find joy, my stepmother reveled in taking it from me. I couldn't lose more books. I couldn't lose more of the garden. I couldn't lose more of my past.

For a moment I let my thoughts run wild as I considered restoring the garden, spending my days in the sun, weeding and pruning and

planting. But almost as quickly as I conjured the dream, I stamped it out.

Even if I miraculously found time to garden amongst all of my other responsibilities, my evil stepmother would have it all torn out just because it was something I loved. She would take it from me just to be spiteful. Better to leave it alone, overgrown and unnoticed, and at least it could stay as it was.

Oh! But it was unbearable, living here like this! How could anyone survive in life with no joy and no love? What if she was right, what if I was never free from this misery? I realized hopelessly that I would never be free of my family and the torture of living here under their cruelty. I was trapped, and I had no hope of escape.

Eight

I was coaxed from my sorrow by a curious cadence.

A faint melody floated on the breeze, and I hushed my cries, straining my ears in search of the source of the sound.

My breath caught in my throat.

It was no bird. The most beautiful woman I had ever seen was perched gracefully at the fountain's edge, humming a soft melody. The surface rippled as she plucked petals from a tiny rosebud and dropped them into the still water.

I peered at her through wet lashes, trying to blink away the vision of her, positive I must be hallucinating. She was tiny and plump, no taller than a canary. An ethereal halo of white light surrounded her, and for a moment I mistook her for an angel. Her sheer dress shimmered like gossamer in the fading light. Lavender wings unfurled behind her, iridescent and delicate, glinting as they moved with the breeze. Her pouty lips curled into a smile as she toyed with the flower, rolling its stem between her thumb and forefinger.

She tucked a strand of violet hair behind a pointed ear, and I sat in stunned silence at the sight.

She was *a fairy*.

My mind whirled, unable to make sense of what I was seeing.

That can't be. Fairies were mere myths, folklore and poppycock, as my stepmother liked to say. Bookish fiction and useless daydreams.

And yet, here was one, settled comfortably in my garden.

I thought about everything I knew about fairies from my books. In some of the stories they were kind and generous, granting wishes and sprinkling pixie dust on wishful children; in others they were tricky and mischievous—sometimes wicked, even.

I was distraught, and yet, just watching her twirling that flower without a care in the world lifted my spirits and made my heart pound wildly. In that moment, even through my tears, I felt a spark of joy light up within me.

She was mesmerizing. The world around me faded and my troubles were forgotten.

“Are you—” I began to ask her who she was, or what exactly she was, but all of my questions sounded too silly to speak aloud. Her wings flittered behind her and I blurted out the first thing that popped into my head.

“Are you my fairy godmother?” I asked, hope blooming in my chest.

“Oh, goodness, no,” she laughed, and I felt my cheeks redden with shame. “I am not . . . *qualified* to be anything as esteemed as a godmother,” she explained, her voice taking on a seriousness. “But I *am* a fairy, and I may be able to help you,” she finished. “You may call me Seraphina,” she said with a mischievous smile, her blue eyes twinkling in the moonlight.

“M—my name is Ella,” I stammered, taken off guard by this mischievous fairy. I knew I shouldn’t tell a fairy my true name, lest I be overpowered by fairy magic and bound forever. But she was so alluring and I felt so hopeful when I looked at her, I could hardly help myself from throwing my name at her. It was almost as if she coaxed it out of me with magic.

“Ella,” she rolled my name on her tongue. I liked how it sounded in her mouth. Her voice was musical, like the plucking of a harp. “Did you not hear, my dear? There is a royal ball tonight.”

“I don’t care about balls,” I mumbled, swiping away trails of tears that streaked down my cheeks.

“It is a rare thing indeed to find a lovely young maiden with no interest in attending such an opulent event. It has been the talk of the city, all anyone can speak of.”

I blushed at her calling me lovely. I wasn’t used to being complimented, and I wasn’t sure how to respond. But I liked it, being called lovely. It felt different from when the messenger had done it. Seraphina said it with more sincerity, somehow.

Seeing I was in no state to parry with her, she spoke again.

“Everyone was summoned by royal decree,” she lilted, inching closer, her eyes glistening like stars.

“Then why aren’t *you* there?” I snapped back, allowing rudeness to slip into my tone.

I was shocked at how quickly I had flared, and a pang of remorse shot through me. I was ashamed of my temper. Someone was showing me

kindness, and here I was, ungraciously sassing them. I was no better than my stepmother.

Maybe she was right about me—who could ever love someone like me?

The fairy laughed. Her short lavender hair bobbed as her shoulders shook with amusement.

“I *was* at the ball, if you must know,” she said with a titter, clearly finding delight in this back-and-forth. “But then I heard your cries. They carried on the wind so sorrowfully, I knew I had to find you,” she replied, her penetrating stare refocusing on me.

“Why *are* you crying?” she asked airily, her head tilting sweetly to one side.

It did not feel like she was mocking me as my sisters would have done. She seemed genuinely curious.

But I didn't have an answer for her. I wanted to say something clever, or something meaningful, or at least something true . . . but I could not form the words. It was everything that had been building up and weighing me down. Where could I begin to explain everything to her? It wasn't just one thing. There were so many things.

I missed my parents and the easy life I had known here before. I missed feeling happy and loved. I was trying my hardest to honor their memory, to keep the estate from crumbling into dust, and it was futile. My stepmother was determined to run it into the ground and there was nothing I could do to stop her.

I wanted to rest. To relax.

I wanted to forget my troubles.

I wanted to let go.

I wanted to be loved.

I needed a glimmer of hope.

Thinking about it all made me burst into tears again, and on fluttering wings she lifted into the air and floated down to sit beside me on the damp ground. She grew in size until she was nearly my height. She tucked me into the crook of her arm and held me while I collapsed into her, sobbing into her buxom chest.

Everything that had been building up within me tumbled out, like a dam breaking, and once I started crying, I couldn't stop. I told her

everything. About the threats and the insults, the violence and abuse. My fear and exhaustion and despair.

“There, now, you have a good cry. That's it,” she consoled, wrapping her arms around me tight.

I cried harder, not from the sadness that had brought me to this point, but from the comfort of knowing I wasn't alone. In her embrace, even if just for this hour, I felt a release I hadn't realized I needed, and the tears flowed freely, mingling with the soothing sound of her whispers.

“Tears are cleansing; they wash the eyes so that you may see clearly.”

When my sobs finally tapered off and my breathing steadied, I did feel better. I was sure I looked a mess, with my hair wild and eyes rimmed red with tears, but my heart felt lighter, as if by letting my sadness out I had cleared out some cobwebs.

Seraphina reached out, lifting my chin with a single delicate forefinger, forcing me to meet her gaze. She swiped a thumb under one eye, wiping away my tears.

“Now. Can you tell me what it is that troubles you? Anyone as beautiful as you should never be made to feel such pain. I would like to help you, if I can.”

She listened as I rambled on, venting all of my frustration and pain. She was a good listener, and let me cry, and let me complain, and never once rushed me or interrupted. She only shook her head and held my hand as I told her about my abusive stepmother and careless sisters. I felt a strange sense of relief, as if simply saying it all aloud began to lighten the heavy burden I had been carrying.

Without a word, she took my hand in hers and guided it to rest over my own heart. She then placed her hand over mine, and momentarily we hung there, frozen in time, hearts beating in time. I lost myself in her eyes, a mesmerizing shade of blue that twinkled like the stars on a clear night. It felt like she was seeing right into my heart, right into my soul.

“Do you wish to find happiness, here and now?”

Yes, I thought to myself, *of course I wish to be happy.*

I just don't know how.

As she tucked a strand of hair behind my ear, her fingertips barely brushed my skin, but they left me buzzing with heat.

She traced a finger down my neck and shoulder, down to my elbow, down my forearm, to my fingertips.

“Everyone deserves to be happy,” the fairy said, her tone dropping to a whisper and breaking into my thoughts. “Including you. Especially you.” Still holding my hand, she lifted it to her mouth and kissed my palm, sending a shiver of anticipation through me.

“I would like to make you so happy, Ella.”

I shook my head, confusion swirling through my mind. I felt so many conflicting feelings, and I couldn’t unravel my thoughts. I wanted to move, and at the same time, I couldn’t get my body to untangle itself from this sultry fairy. She was the first person in so long who had made me feel any joy, and I did not want to let go.

“I don’t understand,” I confessed.

“I’m a fairy, dear. Make a wish, and let's make some magic,” she told me with a wink and a wicked grin.

Nine

A wish?

Even with my love of fairy tales and magic, I had never considered wishing on stars—or fairies, for that matter—as a real possibility. Magic was not reality. Life was not a fairy-tale story.

And yet, here was a magical fairy, challenging everything I had ever been told.

If fairies and magic were real, what if wishes really could come true?

Hope blossomed within my heart as I thought about the things I had wished for over the years. For my parents to be alive again. For the estate to be restored. For my stepmother to respect me, for my sisters to love me. For an easier life. For an escape from the burdens that weighed me down. For hot tea and a bath.

My thoughts spiraled like falling leaves dancing in the breeze. I could not waste this opportunity on something so trivial as hot tea and a bath, or to be able to sleep in tomorrow, even though I badly wanted all of those things.

But my mind drew a blank. What could I wish for that would make me happy?

The truth of it terrified me, but I knew with clarity what I needed to wish for.

I needed to escape. I needed to let go. Let go of this life and everything that was weighing me down and keeping me here in misery. Leave it all behind, the estate that could never be saved and the family that didn't love me; leave it all behind and search for happiness.

It was time.

I thought back to my frazzled escape plan and wondered if I had enough time to gather my books before fleeing like a bandit in the night. Where would I go?

It didn't matter.

Seraphina would help me. Her magic was a lifeline, and I had to reach out and take it.

I clung to her, desperation clawing at me.

“I wish for an escape,” I said in a burst of inspiration, or perhaps desperation.

This was my chance. I could go, now; I could run away and never look back, if only this beautiful fairy would whisk me away. “Please. Take me away from here.”

“Where would you like to go?” she whispered, and I nodded, silent and breathless, suddenly willing to follow her anywhere.

“Anywhere,” I gasped, my breath ragged and pleading. I didn’t care where I went. I only knew that she was my way out.

The air seemed to pulse with magic and I instantly felt the shift, as if a weight had been lifted from my chest.

A fog settled over my brain, and I forgot my urgency. It was just me and Seraphina and the pure pleasure of being heard and seen and helped and *wanted*.

“I am going to help you escape, lovely Ella,” Seraphina crooned, leaning in and taking my hand.

My eyes locked on hers.

“How?” I managed to squeak out, breathless and hot.

I didn’t know why I felt so wanton around her. It was a wholly new feeling for me, and I couldn’t help myself. I wanted to touch her. To kiss her. To breathe in the scent of her.

Seraphina stepped closer, her wings shimmering with every movement, a delicate kaleidoscope of colors dancing in the twilight.

“I have a few ideas,” she said, her voice barely above a whisper, sultry and seductive. Her eyes roved over my body, and I indulged in the feeling of being seen as a woman and not a dirty servant.

My eyes drifted over the curves of her body, and I found myself unable to look away from her beauty. She was ethereal. I couldn’t help but admire the way the silver sheer fabric of the dress clung to her, revealing the luscious lines and rounded peaks of her form. There was something enchanting about how she carried herself, exuding a graceful confidence that hooked me. I swallowed, shifting as I felt wetness pool between my legs.

Something shifted in the air, a charged energy that danced like candle flame between us. I could feel my pulse quicken as Seraphina’s fingers intertwined with mine, and without thinking, I leaned into her as if in a trance, drawn in by the scent of jasmine that radiated from her. The

world around me faded to a blur—only the two of us remained, heartbeats harmonizing in a passionate rhythm. My breathing hitched, anticipation entwined with uncertainty.

Seraphina returned the kiss, her breath warm against my skin. Time seemed to stand still as her lips met mine—soft and sweet, like the first light of dawn kissing the horizon. It was a gentle kiss, but it unfurled a churning tide of emotions within me that threatened to spill out in a gushing torrent.

I could not comprehend why I was feeling like this, and for once, I did not question it. I allowed myself to feel it, and it was pure bliss.

I melted against her, welcoming the moment as if it were the first rays of sun after a long, dark night. I had spent so long feeling lost in a shadow of despair, but as our kiss deepened, I felt the weight of loneliness lift away, replaced by a glimmer of hope. It was a feeling I had almost forgotten, and so many other feelings came with it—feelings I had repressed for so long.

I brought my hand up to trace the curve of her jawline before knotting my fingers in her silken hair. Her hands roved across the small of my back, and I pressed my body into hers, needing to be closer to her.

When we finally separated, both of us wide-eyed and breathless, I could feel my cheeks flushed with excitement.

“Oh, pretty Ella,” Seraphina breathed, her voice thick with emotion. “You deserve so much love. Let me show you how much love you deserve.”

Ten

Seraphina took my hand and spun me, twirling me around the garden as if she had not a care in the world. She led me around the courtyard in a waltz, and I laughed, despite myself.

Seraphina was making me giddy. There was something about her that made me feel safe. It was strange, to feel so much trust for someone I had just met. But I couldn't help it. As she spun me around and kissed me, for a moment, I forgot my troubles.

But all too soon our dance was at an end. She dropped my hand mid-spin and I whirled into a wall of ivy, unprepared.

"If you are to escape your past, you can't do it in those rags," she tsked.

Self-consciousness crept back up on me, and I smoothed my skirts, though I knew there was little that could be done to help my rough appearance.

"To step into your new life, you must first shed your old one . . . Oh, but don't worry. I'll give you something much better to wear than those old scraps."

With a flick of her wrist, ribbons of luminescent starlight unfurled from her wand. They swirled around me, playfully gliding across my skin, tracing the contours of my body in a tender caress, teasing me and setting my senses aflame. I inhaled the heady scent of jasmine as vines plaited themselves into my hair, weaving delicate braids down my back.

Seraphina's gaze held mine, and it was as if she was pulling me closer with nothing but the intensity of her ice-blue eyes. The ribbons of magic dipped and swayed, sliding my shabby dress from my shoulders with a tender reverence. It was as if by unlacing my gown she was freeing me from the ties that kept me bound to this life.

Every subtle movement, every brush of the magical threads, stirred something deep within me—a lustfulness I had never known before.

The ribbons danced around my body, loosening the ties of my chemise, allowing my dress to pool to the ground like water, leaving a trail of glittering fairy dust. My body bared to the night sky, my nipples pricked

with the chill. The last of the ribbons fell away, leaving me naked and exposed, yet I was unashamed and unafraid.

I closed my eyes and released a breath I hadn't known I was holding, basking in the feeling of pure liberation.

"Ella," she purred, her voice wrapping around me like the softest silk. "You are radiant."

She took a step toward me and traced the outline of my fingertips with her own, her eyes lingering over the curves of my body.

I liked the way she looked at me—with affection and longing, as if I was beautiful. With her gazing at me like that, I felt beautiful. For a moment, I could see myself as she saw me, not just my physical form, but the very essence of who I was, reflected in her eyes.

Strong and brave and worthy.

The connection that pulsed between us grew stronger with every second. I could feel her energy braiding itself with my own, and long vines of magical power coursed between us. In that moment, without a single physical touch, our souls intertwined.

"You work so hard, you do so much for everyone around you. You must be exhausted . . . Why don't you lay down on this bed of grass, and let someone take care of you for once?"

With a wave of her wand, the fairy conjured up a glimmering breeze, and I felt my heart swell with wonder as I watched the garden spring to life around me. I watched in awe as the ground cleaved open, and fresh, beautiful flowers emerged from the darkness.

With a swish, she directed shimmering ribbons of magical energy at the overgrown hedges, and I watched in awe as they untangled and pruned themselves, revealing the lush greenery beneath. Next, she turned her attention to the tangle of rose bushes, and with another flourish, vibrant blooms erupted into life, their buds shimmering with a pearly gleam. The whole garden transformed before my eyes, and I couldn't hold back the tears of joy that welled up. I felt a profound sense of peace.

I turned to her, my mouth agape.

"How did you—"

"Magic," she said with a playful smile.

Moonbeams filtered through the brambles, casting a silvery glow around us. Seraphina took my hand and guided me down. I hesitated,

feeling too restless to truly let go, but I allowed her to arrange me as she liked.

Seraphina smiled, her eyes sparkling with mischief. I looked on, enraptured, as she let her own gown fall away, revealing her perfect, perky breasts.

"Why don't you just relax, Ella."

Her words were all it took to break the spell, reminding me with a crushing force of who and what I was. But a lingering fear gripped me tight, worry weaving its way into my thoughts.

Relax? I couldn't relax! I had to make my getaway, before it was too late. The ball would be over soon, and if my stepmother caught me like this, lounging in the garden I would surely be locked away in the tower and left to rot. I had to go, now, before it was too late. This was my only chance, and I had to take it. I had to go— *now*.

She could sense my uncertainty. I moved to rise, but she bore down on me and pinned me with a kiss.

I was distracted by her ferocity, her confidence. Seraphina knew what she wanted and she went for it. I bet she never wasted time wrestling with what-ifs or could-be's. If she wanted to do something, she did it. I admired that about her. Her boldness was almost more attractive than her body.

Almost.

Lost in my thoughts, combined with the distracting pleasure of her nibbling on my earlobe, it took me a moment to take notice of how she had sat back, offering me a chance to take my leave. Of course, all thoughts of leaving had flown from my brain and I remained reclined in the bed of grass, for once relaxed, as I allowed Seraphina to play with me.

I was taken aback when, with a sweep of her hand, the ivy vines sprang to life, their emerald tendrils swirling gracefully around me. They wrapped around my arms and legs with a firmness that startled me.

I struggled against their strength, but they held me firm, preventing me from running. The tendrils that had plaited themselves into my hair pulled, wrenching my head back, giving me a good look at Seraphina, who was now poised over me,

"What . . . are you . . . doing?" I grunted, fighting the plants as they wound themselves around me as if I was a trellis, and I found myself unable to resist as the weight of them bore down on me.

My question was met with a question.

“Does it hurt?” she asked, but continued directing them to loop around my limbs.

“No,” I offered, unsure, but still I struggled against their might.

“Do you want it to hurt?”

“No!” I exclaimed. “Let me go, Seraphina! I thought you were going to help me escape! I trusted you!” I shouted, angry and ashamed for being so foolish. Of course this was some evil fairy trick.

“You can still trust me,” she assured me. “You want to be free. I can help you. But before you can free your body, you need to free your mind,” she said, directing the vines to tighten just a bit more.

“I don't understand,” I said, my breath hitching, shaking my head to try to clear it. “How will imprisoning me in the garden shrubs help me free my mind?”

“Before you can be free of this place, you must let go,” she whispered, tickling me with her tongue as she trailed kisses down my neck. “Let go of everything that is holding you back. You must unbind yourself.”

I could not make sense of what she meant by all of this, but I wanted to. I so badly wanted to be free . . . If this was the path to letting go, perhaps I should follow it.

“I want you to tell me if I hurt you, or if I do anything at all that you don't like.”

I chewed my lip but nodded, unsure of what I had agreed to when I asked to escape with this wicked fairy.

“If this gets to be too much for you, your safe word is pumpkin.”

“Okay,” I nodded, chewing my lip in unsure anticipation.

“Say it,” she instructed.

“Pumpkin,” I said,

“Good,” she praised me, and resumed kissing and stroking me, and I let myself relax into the pleasure of being caressed and held. I was surprised that I was able to relax, being tied up, but it was shockingly comforting, feeling held by the vines and Seraphina simultaneously.

“Let me take you to a magical place. Do you trust me?”

I wanted to trust her. I wanted—needed—to trust in something.

Eleven

I found that I liked the way the vines caressed me, slowly stroking and tickling me as Seraphina directed them up and down my body. She flicked her wand and one smooth leaf gave me a quick spank on my backside. I yelped, more in surprise than in pain. It felt different than the harsh slap I had endured from my stepmother earlier; this was more playful, a quick smack, and I was surprised to find that I didn't mind it. Pleasure and pain intertwined, and I could hardly tell where one ended and the other began. It was confusing and completely overwhelming.

But I felt more free being tied up than I had ever felt before.

I was able to relax. For once, I had nothing to do, nowhere to be, no demands pulling me away. I was able to bask in pure pleasure. I inhaled deeply, surrendering. Seraphina's enchantment enveloped me, turning my unease into a cocoon of calm, and I found myself finally able to breathe.

I allowed her to play with me, trusting her not to abuse the power I had given her. The vines tangled around me and held me bound as she directed her wand this way and that, conducting the vines to tighten at my wrists or loosen around my torso until they were rather comfortable. The leaves stroked and petted my nude body at her behest, flicking at my nipples and squeezing around my thighs.

Finally she returned to me, covering my body with her own. She continued to kiss me, our chests heaving in time, our nipples grazing. Her hands were all over me, and I surrendered to the sensation. It felt so good to be touched.

I knew I could say the magic word and at any time I could leave. I could go, make my grand escape. I needed to go, but something held me there, a desire for her, an ache deep in my center. Her touch set me ablaze with longing, and every time she did it, I forgot my thoughts entirely. *Was this fairy magic?*

Seraphina drew her hand up my thigh and I closed my eyes, losing myself in the magic of this moment. She took her time, slowly grazing my skin with her fingertips in teasing ripples that set me aflame. I needed her touch so badly. I tried to lift my hips to meet her halfway, as if the feel of

her hands on my sex would put an end to this agony she had ensnared me in, but the vines gripped me tighter and held me in place.

Trapped.

She reached down to the curls between my thighs, using two fingers to part me. My lips were sticky with desire, and I panted in eagerness. It was excruciating, the way she was teasing me, toying with me and working me up.

She nibbled my nipples into stiff peaks, and I squirmed. This was a new kind of misery for me and I was already desperate for relief.

Her finger brushed over my cunt and I sucked in a breath at her touch. It felt so different from when I was touching myself. I was hyper-aware of every movement, every nerve and muscle, all of them pulled tight like a bow ready to snap.

I was anxious for her to finish me off, and I thought if I could just move my hips I could reach her . . . but the vines held me tight.

I was completely at her mercy.

Tsk-tsk, she chided.

“Impatient,” she admonished, but swiftly put an end to my suffering.

Finally, she dipped a finger down into me, gathering my wetness and sliding it across my clit. I nearly fractured from sensitivity.

She plunged a finger inside of me, and I couldn't wrap my mind around everything I was feeling. Her kisses, her touch, it was all so much. I loved it, I needed more of it. I leaned into her, arching my back and writhing beneath her, trusting her to take me to the magical place she had promised. Her fingers curved and worked me as I bucked beneath her touch. I felt myself clench around her hand before she withdrew and I couldn't contain my cries as I pleaded with her not to stop.

“Don't stop,” I begged, trying to catch my breath.

“I want to know what you taste like,” she whispered, nipping at my ear as she brought her hand up to her mouth, licking the glistening slickness from her fingers. She closed her eyes and savored it, the taste of *me*.

The magical vines gave a light tug and I did not resist as they spread my legs wider, allowing her a better view. I felt exposed and yet, at the same time, I felt seen.

She gripped my backside, her sharp nails deliciously digging into my flesh. I watched her retreat lower, trailing kisses down my chest to my navel. I wondered how I looked to her, dirty and disheveled and rolling in the dirt while she hovered above me, ethereal and heavenly.

She planted a kiss on my thigh and nibbled,
“Are you ready? Can I taste you, Ella?”

I nodded my head, and she wasted no time. She dipped her mouth to my core, gently sucking and lapping at the most sensitive parts of me. Her tongue parted me and glided up and down my clit, stoking a fire that was building inside of me. I lifted my hips, aching for more, more, *more*.

Every touch, every lick, was like a live wire, awakening parts of me I had never known existed. I surrendered to the flood of sensations, reveling in the way her hands explored my body, igniting fire in my veins. It was intoxicating, this dance between us, as my body arched instinctively towards her, craving more. I lost myself in the moment, relishing the sheer euphoria of being utterly, blissfully free.

“Don't stop,” I pleaded, afraid that at any moment she would disappear in a cloud of stardust. _

All competing sensations became too intense. I tried to back off but the vines held me tight again. I was trapped, I couldn't escape.

The vines twisted even tighter around me, coiling around my arms and legs, knotting and holding me firmer as my body bucked and writhed with pleasure. I threw my head back in total euphoria, closing my eyes and allowing myself to let go.

I had never known such pleasure, such joy. I was weightless, afloat, like a flower petal in water, drifting languidly, with not a care in the world. There was no hurry, no rush, no fear. In that moment, every sorrow washed from me. I was an ocean, a sea of crashing waves, untamable and unashamed.

I closed my eyes as the world around me blurred into a blinding white light. I was in the meadow, I was suspended in a cocoon of pure bliss. It lasted only a moment and an eternity at the same time, and then everything exploded into prisms of color, swirling around us in a flurry of rainbows and fairy dust. I could not contain my cries of ecstasy as Seraphina bore down on me, quieting my shrieks with a kiss.

Twelve

A clock rang out in the distance, breaking the spell, and reality came crashing down on me like a tidal wave.

“Pumpkin!” I cried out in a panic as the bell echoed through the night. I sat upright, jolted from my blissful climax.

The vines had dropped away the second I voiced the safe word, unfurling and retreating, leaving me breathless and bewildered. I glanced back at them as they wrapped themselves around the trellises and trees. I was reluctant to relinquish the feel of them.

I grasped around for the tattered shreds of my dress to cover myself when I remembered Seraphina’s magical ribbons undressing me. The last thing I needed was for my family to return to find me sprawled in the garden like *this*.

I didn't have time for any of this. I didn't even have time to pack up my scant belongings, let alone find a new gown, and still run away before they returned from the ball. I was out of time.

I looked at Seraphina, panicked, but she radiated a calm confidence.

She touched the tip of her wand to the crown of my head and a shower of fairy dust rained down on me, the ribbons of magic again unfurling. They encircled me, wrapping me in a stunning pale blue gown of brocaded silk embroidered with shimmering silver threads. The bodice laced itself up behind me, pulling me tight, but not so much that I couldn’t breathe. It was comforting to me, much as the vines had been. The skirt billowed out from my hips in a splendid pannier, stitched with tiny pearls and diamonds that caught on the moonlight and glistened like a spatter of stars. A froth of lace adorned the hem, and elegant puffed sleeves festooned with lace cuffs gathered at my shoulders. I twirled around in a giddy excitement, too stunned to do more than giggle like a silly maiden.

I had never worn such a splendid gown before, I had never been shown such generosity. Seraphina had been more than kind, she had shown me love when I needed it most, and this night had been pure magic. I marveled at the magic unfolding around me.

“This is how I see you,” Seraphina said with a smile. “This is how you deserve to see yourself, Ella. Elegant, graceful, beautiful, stunning.”

I was so overwhelmed that for a moment I forgot about my escape plan.

“Oh, I almost forgot,” she mused. With another tiny swish of her wand a satin sash cinched itself around my waist, unfurling itself into a sort of pocket. A heaviness dropped into it, and I reached down to find a treasure.

I turned it over in my hands, disbelieving.

It was my book.

The book of fairy tales. It was my father’s book, repaired and restored. Not to perfect condition, but to the familiar worn and torn copy that I cherished so dearly.

Of all the gifts she had given me tonight, this book was the best one.

My eyes clouded with tears that I could not keep back.

“Oh, thank you, Seraphina!” I bawled, squeezing her in a tight embrace, happy tears spilling down my face.

“Look inside,” she nudged, and I thumbed the tome open to my favorite place. It was the story of the Flower Fairy, but it didn’t end where I knew it to end. There was more to the story.

I began to read, but I tore my eyes from the page and fixed them on her.

“What is this?” I asked, a mix of wonder and confusion plain on my face.

“That is the rest of the story. The book your father gave you was a storybook for children, a simpler and more tame version. Do not fret—the story as you knew it remains. Only, I have given you the rest of it. So you may know how it ends.”

I was too overcome to speak.

Misunderstanding my silence, Seraphina sheepishly got out her wand again. “I’m sorry, I changed it without asking. I can restore the book to how it was.”

“No,” I protested, pressing the book tight to my chest. I liked the change. I was excited to read it. Touched by the sentiment.

It was rather romantic, I thought.

There was a second chapter to my favorite fairy tale. A new story, entirely.

I cradled the book in my hands, not sure if I was ready to know how the tale ended.

I didn't want to read it yet.

I wanted to save it. To savor it.

I looked down at my beautiful gown, and the priceless book in my hands, and thought about the intense pleasure and joy she had brought me only minutes before. What was it all for?

I did not understand it. I could not be seen by my stepmother like *this* any more than when I had been naked.

My stomach plummeted to my feet as I was jolted back to reality. My window of opportunity for escape was closing. Everyone would be home soon, and I had no idea what horrors were planned for me after my outburst earlier. If I was ever going to run, I had to go now.

"I—I'm sorry, but I need to go," I stammered, pulling away from her.

It was now or never. If I wanted to be free of this place, I had to leave, before it was too late.

She saw my conflict and held out her hand, offering me a choice.

"That's not exactly a wish," she grinned. "Have you so quickly forgotten my powers?"

I exhaled, expelling an anxious chortle.

"Make a wish," she urged.

I knew that I could wish for anything, and this fairy would grant it. But I did not want to waste such a precious gift.

"You may run, if that is what you wish. Perhaps you would wish for your life back? I could even take care of your stepmother and sisters, send them away and leave you in peace, rightfully restored as lady of the manor."

I gasped. It had never crossed my mind to wish for such a thing. Possibilities I had never dared allow myself to dream of danced before me, all of them just out of reach.

Did I even want those things for myself? Maybe I had, once. But now? My dreams and desires had shifted in a single night.

"Or, you may come with me," she pleaded, offering me her hand once more.

Our eyes locked, and in that moment, I realized that I would follow her anywhere, whether I had been hypnotized by fairy magic or not.

“Nothing remains for you here,” she said sadly.

She was right, but a tear slipped down my cheek all the same.

I thought about the house that I had spent my entire life in. The beautiful memories and all the love I had known. Picnics in the garden, stories by the fire. Family dinners and laughter and love. I let them fill my heart.

I knew that no matter how hard I worked, or how much effort I put into saving it, I would never be able to restore this place to what it had once been. Without love, a house was not a home.

My stepmother and my sisters would never love me. They did not know love, so how could they give love to me when they had never felt it themselves? It shocked me to realize that I did not feel anger toward them. Instead, I felt pity for them. Pity that they would never know the magic of loving.

I saw that now.

I also saw that if I stayed here without love, it would break me.

I touched a hand to the fountain in a silent farewell. The coolness of the stone sent a shiver through me. Or perhaps it was the knowledge of what I was about to do.

Hope bloomed in my chest at the idea of a life beyond these garden walls, a life with Seraphina.

“Come with me,” she repeated, her eyes shining bright with possibility. “My wish is to see all of your wishes granted, lovely Ella. Unbind yourself from this life. Let yourself fly away, and you will soar.”

I could feel that just this one night with Seraphina had changed me completely. I didn’t want her to leave, I wasn’t ready for this feeling of love to end. I wanted more, I needed more. More time with her, more to understand myself and time to show her the same love she has shown me.

To follow Seraphina, to find love in this world and to spend my life chasing it . . . that would be a true gift and a blessing.

With newfound courage, I turned to Seraphina and took her outstretched hand. With her by my side I stepped away from it all and into a new life, the unknown future, full of possibility and hope.

THE END

Afterword

Thank you for reading *Unbound by Midnight* ! I had a lot of fun writing this story, and I hope you enjoyed reading it. Please consider leaving a quick review—it is the best way to support authors like me!

Want more?

Stay tuned for my *Jack & the Beanstalk* and *Magic Mirror* retellings, coming in 2025!

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Amanda is a self-published indie author of adult fantasy romance books. *Unbound by Midnight* is her debut novella.

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